

Unit Leadership Program Menu of Solutions Template

Solution Title: 38 Blazing Flashes of the Obvious

Summary: The 38 Blazing Flashes of the Obvious come from Major General Perry Smith, USAF (Ret) and have been used by many to sum up the critical roles of a leader and those obvious things we should all do to ensure we serve effectively.

Competency Link(s): Primary: Influencing Others
 Creativity and Innovation
 Mentoring
 Secondary: Self Awareness and Learning
 Taking Care of People

Solution Type: Training ☒ Non Training Solution ☐

Cost of Item: 0\$

Time required to conduct: Variety of instructional Techniques but all could be summed up in 30 minutes - See thoughts attached below

Resources needed to conduct: Copies of the list for participants

Is this item presented elsewhere in the Coast Guard (LAMS, CPOA, OCS, etc)?

Yes ☒ (000) No ☐

Comments:

Recommended Instructional Techniques:

Group Discussion - Provide the readings ahead of time and have the group separated and divvy up the "Flashes" and ask each sub-group to brief out on the "Flash" and its applicability to your given situation or how your unit could look to capitalize on the things you do right now in alignment with the "Flash" or develop the "Flash" locally at your unit.

Another Group Technique would be to divide your group into sub-groups and have each member select the three "Flashes" that mean the most to them (Importance, room for improvement, etc. but all must agree before the exercise starts) and then bring the sub-group together and they must agree on which three mean the most to the sub-group and then finally all the sub-groups come together and they must brief out their "3 "flashes" and then the group as a whole must come to agreement on the three that mean the most to the group. Interesting exercise - will show alignment on issues and also generate healthy discussion in the sub-groups and larger overall group. Key is to pick the topic for the selection of the first three - Room for improvement, importance to being a leader, three qualities your unit lacks or already possesses, etc. If you have the time you can run through the exercise a couple of times focusing on different issues each time.

38 BLAZING FLASHES OF THE OBVIOUS: MAJ. GEN. PERRY SMITH, USAF (RET)

It has been my great honor and pleasure in recent years to teach seminars and give talks on leadership to an incredibly diverse number of groups. Happily, most of the groups give me four to five hours to share my management and leadership insights and talk about how the changing world environment and rapidly developing technology will change the way leaders will lead in the future.

In addition, I am often asked to do the impossible: to speak to large audiences on leadership, to motivate them to improve their leadership skills, to inspire them to be better leaders and to acquaint them with all the new technologies and concepts for leaders-----all of this in less than an hour's time. In these cases, I must skim off my most important insights and deliver them with as much energy and impact as I can muster. Hence, I have come up with what I call my "38 blazing flashes of the obvious" about leadership. It is my hope that some of these insights may help you in the years ahead.

1. ***Know yourself.*** All leaders should realize that they are, in fact, five or more people: (1) who they are and (2) who they think they are-----and these are never the same, (3) who their bosses think they are, (4) who their peers think they are, and (5) who their subordinates think they are. Leaders who work hard to get feedback from many sources are more likely to maintain a handle on their various selves and hence be better leaders.

2. ***Correct mistakes.*** Leaders must be brutally honest with themselves, or they will slip into the terrible habit of self-deception. Even the best leaders make some mistakes every week. By smoking out these mistakes and correcting them quickly, a good leader can become a great one.

3. ***Be magnanimous.*** Leaders who share their power and their time can accomplish extraordinary things. The best leaders understand that leadership is the liberation of talent; hence the gain power by constantly giving it away.

4. ***Squint with your ears.*** The most important skill for leaders is listening. Introverts have a great edge in this regard since they tend to listen quietly and not to interrupt a lot. Too many bosses use the time, when someone is trying to tell them something thinking of what they will say next rather than listening.

5. ***Learn from failure.*** I had four major setbacks in my military career, including being fired by the deputy secretary of defense (I was the military assistant) and losing four F-15s when I was the wing commander at Bitberg. I learned much more from my failures than from my successes and became, over time, rather tolerant of the honest failure in others.

6. ***Identify and protect the innovators.*** For three years, when I was Commandant of the National War College, I had working for me a Medal of Honor winner from Vietnam, Army Col. Jack Jacobs, now retired. He was by far the most innovative person I have ever known. Well over 50 percent of his ideas were awful, but buried among these bad ideas was an occasional pearl of wisdom. I learned from working with Jack that I had to protect him and my organization from

his bad ideas while encouraging him to keep surfacing all his ideas so I could help him identify and run with the great ones.

7. ***Be decisive.*** Retired Gen. Jim Abramson taught me his 60% rule for leaders. When top leaders have about 60% of the information that they think they need to make a prudent decision, they must then decide. Leaders who demand perfect or near perfect information are usually months or years late making decisions. In addition, the better leaders go through a checklist before making a decision that includes, the following checks: sanity, dignity, integrity, systems, long-range implications and safety.

8. ***Don't become indispensable.*** Organizations need indispensable instruction, not indispensable people. Leaders should not allow themselves to become indispensable nor let any of their subordinates' do so.

9. ***Avoid the cowardice of silence.*** How often have you sat in meetings and watched so-called "leaders" sit on their hands when it was time to raise a hand and speak up? Leadership requires courage----courage to make waves, courage to take on your bosses when they are wrong, the courage of your convictions. Every Robert E. Lee needs some Longstreets to tell him exactly the way it is.

10. ***Thank people creatively.*** Too many bosses know how to say thank you in only three or four ways. In addition, too many bosses only compliment the truly outstanding contributions for the truly gifted people. The person of average ability who is doing his or her best deserves to be thanked often.

11. ***Help bosses be better leaders.*** Half of all bosses are below average. It is the responsibility of subordinate leaders to help their bosses be better at their job. I have the phrases, "that's above my pay grade" and "the boss has spoken:" "there is no way I will take him on the issue." Leaders must lead upward, sideways and downward, not just downward.

12. ***Be a visionary leader.*** Leaders even at lower level must try to see some long-term goals for their people and for the organizations that they lead. People want to know where they are going and in what priority. It is a cop-out to say, "the long term is not my responsibility." I love the quote from Proverbs, "When there is no vision, the people perish." It is the role of leaders at every level to help form and implement that vision.

13. ***Stay intellectually active.*** The future is coming fast. Leaders need to think about the future and prepare their people for it. I recommend joining one organization. The World Future Society, reading two magazines regularly, "The futurist and Technology Review"; and reading two recently published books, "The American Renaissance" by Martin Cetron (St. Martin Press, 1989) and "The new Realities" by Peter Drucker (Harper and Row, 1989).

14. ***Don't waste peoples' time.*** The very best question that a leader can ask in a counseling session is, "how am I, your boss, wasting your time?" Not everyone will tell you but cherish the ones that do, for they will help you grow and prosper as a leader.

15. **Observe and thank the invisible people.** There are lots of fine people doing great work who seldom get thanks because they are invisible. They're working so quietly and so competently that they are often not even noticed by the leader. Try to look past those who fight hard for time with you.

16. **Develop a mind-set of "servant" leadership.** As I look back at the six big leadership jobs I had in the military, I realize that most of my time was spent doing what my subordinates wanted me to do. Too many leaders see their big task as keeping their bosses happy. That is not what leadership is all about. Leadership is about serving the mission and serving your people. Part of the concept of "servant" leadership includes instruction. Leaders must be good teachers. They must explain very complicated concepts; technologies and strategies in simplified ways so that less experienced subordinates can better understand what is required. However, leaders themselves must not forget that explaining things in simplified ways does not make all things simple. This is one of the paradoxes of modern leadership.

17. **Question people creatively.** I once asked a colonel who worked for me if there was anything in his professional or personal life that he would like to share with me since I was his boss. His answer was along the following lines, "Well, sir, now that you have asked, I am dying of degenerative heart disease, I will be dead in five years." It turned out that the high pressure of his Pentagon job was accelerating the deterioration of his health. I moved him to a less pressure-filled job, and eight years later, he is still alive and doing pretty well. I sure am glad I asked him that question.

18. **Be ambitious to do, not to be.** Leaders must avoid power trips. They must not confuse who they are with what they are. Climbing the greasy pole to the top is not about gaining power---it is about using power to serve the mission, and about giving power away.

19. **Criticize up, praise down.** Leaders must deflect at least some of the bad guidance they get from above. It is being loyal to your boss and to the institution you serve to tell the bosses when they are wearing no clothes.

20. **Maintain sound physical fitness.** At the National War College, we had 42-year-old male students with a "health age" of 55, based on their blood chemistry, treadmill tests, diet patterns, smoking and drinking habits, exercise regime and family history. Those with good exercise, diet and personal habits were often five years younger in health age than in chronological age. The best leaders age slowly and gain wisdom quickly.

21. **Develop solid leadership skills.** Military leaders, in general, have a number of weak areas that should be corrected: time management, speed reading, dictation skills, use of brainstorming techniques (both manual and electronic), the use of annual off-site simians with key subordinates, and competency with personal computers, sophisticated software and modems. I can't emphasize too strongly the need for competence in the area of computers. Leaders may think they understand computers, software, modems, electronic bulletin boards, etc., but unless they are using computers regularly, they are technological Neanderthals. All of these areas can be improved easily. All it takes is an acknowledgement of weakness and willingness to improve.

22. ***Avoid cronyism.*** Mentoring subordinates so they will become the better leaders of the future is a very serious responsibility of all leaders. Too many bosses develop favorites, pushing certain subordinates well beyond their level of competence. Don't go back time and time again to push a subordinate. One good push should be enough. If they are as good as you think they are, they should make it on their own. The motto of all leaders should be mentorship with out cronyism.

23. ***Help your people understand you.*** When you take over a new organization, get your key folks together and tell them what your hang-ups are. Help them learn very early what really bugs you. They will appreciate your candor and become comfortable with you quickly.

24. ***Take your folks off site annually.*** Two days is enough. A futurist should be brought in for a couple of hours to stretch minds. A brainstorming session of at least two hours should be scheduled (if at all possible, the IBM electronic brainstorming system should be used) and the leaders should review the past year, drawing out the high and low points, and drawing lessons from each. Here is a great time to dissect and celebrate, to take responsibility for much of the failure and to compliment those responsible for the successes of the past year.

25. ***Smoke out those with low integrity.*** In the 1980's one of the service secretaries allowed a political appointee of very low integrity to serve him for about five years. By tolerating unethical behavior, this secretary did damage to his service and to his own reputation. Many have asked the question, "How could someone so astute be unaware of the long term inappropriate behavior on the part of an immediate subordinate?" In other words, leaders can be damaged by tolerating unethical behavior on the part of subordinates---even though the leaders behave ethically themselves.

26. ***Manage the intangibles.*** The bottom line is not enough. Leaders must focus on the intangibles such as trust, morals, and perceptions. In this area, military leaders usually do better than business leaders, who often focus too intensely on the quarterly report.

27. ***Enjoy your work.*** Working for a preoccupied person with a furrowed brow is no fun. The motto of an upbeat leader should be "take this job and love it." Leaders need to be open to new ideas and to constructive criticism.

28. ***Concentrate on performance as well as results.*** The bottom line can be very deceptive. Leaders who don't concern themselves about the performance leading to the results are making a big mistake. What did it take to gain those great results is often the key question.

29. ***Maintain a sense of outrage.*** There are too many super cool managers who worry so much about keeping the boss and higher headquarters happy that they never allow themselves to be outraged when the system is doing serious damage to the lives and the careers of those working for them. The best leaders do get mad and, using controlled outrage, work hard to put the wrong to right.

30. ***Beware of those who would intimidate you.*** When I was a Brigadier General in the Pentagon, a vice president of an aerospace firm told me that if I did not support his program, "I

will ensure you are not promoted to the next rank.” Be very careful here. Some bosses allow themselves to be intimidated by outsiders, by their own bosses, even by their subordinates. An intimidated boss can never be a great leader. You must have independence of mind to make the right choices.

31. ***Don't get caught in the “activity trap”.*** Those who do not discipline their meeting schedule, their in-box, their travel schedule and their telephone stay so busy that they become guilty of strategic drift. They get so wrapped up in the minutiae that they confuse being busy with being productive. Over time, they become “in-box managers,” not leaders.

32. ***Pick a role model or two.*** My favorite role models are George C. Marshall (Army Chief of Staff 1939-1945), America's best strategic planner; Lorraine Matusak, who is the director of the biggest executive development program in the nation, the W. K. Kellogg Martin-Marietta /corporation. They have inspired and uplifted me through the years. My short list of superb military leaders on active duty include two Army officers, Gen. Jack Galvin, Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, and Gen. Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, two Marines, Gen. Al Gray, Commandant of Marine Corps, and Gen. Jack Dailey, Assistant Commandant of Marine Corps; A Naval officer Adm. Leon Edney, Commander in Chief, Atlantic; and two from the Air Force, Lt. Gen. Lee Butler, Director of Strategic plans and Policy in the office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Lt. Gen. Ron Fogleman, Commander of the Seventh Air Force in Korea. All serve as superb role models for today's professionals.

33. ***Attend a civilian leadership development program.*** I may sound strange to suggest that military leaders can learn about leadership from the civilian world, but it is true. The best programs are those at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, NC, the Kellogg Foundation's program, and the programs run by the Kennedy school at Harvard, and there are a number of other first-rate programs around the country.

34. ***Do some serious reading on leadership and management.*** Every leader should read at least one good book per month. In a year's time, three or four off the 12 books should be on leadership. My favorite books for military leaders are: “Leaders” by Warren G. Bennis (Harper & Row, 1985), “Thriving on Chaos” by Tom Peters (Harper & advantage), “The Killer Angels” by Michael Shaara (McKay, 1974), “The Female Advantage” by Sally Helgesen (Doubleday, 1990).

35. ***Get rid of the fat.*** The military will need lots of leaders in the next few years ----leaders who can effectively and humanely close down organizations while keeping morale up and chaos down. Divestiture planning is, of course, the key.

36. ***Trust your instincts.*** If something looks or smells bad, you had better take another look and fast. You would not have been chosen to be a leader unless you had good experiences and good judgement. Use them.

37. ***Celebrate diversity.*** The next time you hold a meeting of the day with subordinates, look around and see who is in attendance. If the room is full of white males with only a few women and very few members of minority groups, you have a problem. There is no way you can stay

“turned in” to your organization, and maximize the talents and diversity of the work force, if you are not in constant contact with that diversity. It is no longer good enough to tolerate diversity; the best leaders celebrate it.

38. *Get ready for a radically new future.* Soon leaders will have some exciting new technologies to help them to be more efficient and effective leaders. The automatic dictating machine will allow leaders quickly to answer their daily mail, write their weekly column, write effective reports, etc. Teleconferencing will reduce somewhat the need for travel and will speed up consensus building and decision-making. Electronic brainstorming will accelerate the velocity of innovation.

In addition, reorganizations are coming that will “demass” military organizations so that they will be less hidebound, less conservative and less bureaucratic.